

Community Visual Character and Development Analysis

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Community Visual Character and Development Analysis

This chapter examines past and current conditions in Eau Claire's built environment, discusses forces affecting urban form and identifies the major urban design issues facing the community.

Major Issues in Community Visual Character

These are the major community visual character issues identified through the analysis of conditions. Issues are questions to be discussed, debated and resolved during the planning process in light of the other issues noted in the comprehensive plan.

New Residential Neighborhoods

1. **Street Connectivity:** Should streets in new neighborhoods be interconnected or should the pattern be dominated by cul-de-sacs?
2. **Street Design:** Should future minor residential streets be built narrower than they are presently, which is 30 feet between the backs of the curbs?
3. **Sidewalks:** Should future minor residential streets have sidewalks on both sides?
4. **Development Model:** Which development model is preferred: the traditional neighborhood with its emphasis on the street, sidewalk and front yard, or the more low density "suburban" look? Does Eau Claire wish to design its zoning regulations to promote one or the other, or leave it to the market to decide?
5. **Public Space Component:** Should new neighborhood parks have primarily an aesthetic focus or a utilitarian focus (such as gardens and gazebos versus athletic fields and parking lots)?
6. **Small Commercial Nodes:** In what locations, if any, would the older urban model of neighborhood corner store be allowed and encouraged?

Established Residential Neighborhoods

1. **Context-Sensitive Architecture:** Should new infill and redevelopment of existing structures (both single-family and multi-family) follow established site design patterns and be stylistically compatible with the predominant neighborhood aesthetic?

2. **Commercial Activity in Predominately Residential Areas:** Under what conditions, if any, should commercial development be allowed in areas that are predominately residential?
3. **Public Open Space:** Should the City seek to create additional public open space in the older neighborhoods as redevelopment occurs?
4. **Mixture of Housing Types:** In what instances, if any, would it be appropriate to introduce multiple-family housing into single-family neighborhoods? What conditions should be applied in such instances?
5. **Mixed-Use Development:** Where might it be appropriate to mix residential with non-residential land uses? When might they be mixed vertically (housing above business) or horizontally (housing next to commercial space)?
6. **New Cultural Influences:** What should be the City's urban design response, if any, to new cultural influences resulting from its changing population?
7. **Neighborhood Identification:** Should neighborhoods and districts be identified by signs or markers?

Commercial Districts and Corridors

1. **Design Guidelines and Design Review:** Although the site planning and landscaping regulations in the zoning ordinance were improved since the last plan, should they be made more rigorous?
2. **Design Guidelines for Commercial Signs:** Should business signs be more limited in size, height and number?
3. **Service Station Lighting and Signage:** Should the City more tightly control the lighting and designs at commercial developments?
4. **Oakwood Mall and Vicinity:** Should the City promote additional and more intensive development around the shopping mall that may eventually include offices, multiple-family housing, mixed-use development and structured parking?
5. **Major Road Corridor Beautification:** Should the City undertake major landscaping and decorative lighting improvement projects along the major roadways of the city such as US 124 (North Crossing), Hendrickson Drive, US 12 (Clairemount Avenue) and Hastings Way?
6. **Billboards:** Should the City continue to limit billboards?

Riverfronts

1. **Public Access:** What should be done to “open up” the riverfronts to the neighborhoods better? How much parkland should there be?
2. **Land Use:** What is the most appropriate pattern of land use along the rivers?

Other Natural Features

1. **Mount Tom:** Should communication towers be allowed in parks, especially Mount Tom?
2. **Wooded Hillsides:** Should the City strengthen its regulations on tree cutting and grading of slopes?
3. **Sherman, Otter and Lowes Creeks:** Should the city attempt to acquire land along these creeks for public access?

Downtown

1. **Riverfront Open Space:** Should there be more public open space along the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers for public access?
2. **Barstow Avenue Streetscape:** When should South Barstow Avenue be reconstructed with a new streetscape treatment?
3. **Town Square:** Should a “town square” be created next to City Hall and along Eau Claire Street ?
4. **Eau Claire Street:** Should a promenade be built along Eau Claire Street from Graham Avenue to South Farwell Street?
5. **Medical Center Expansion:** To what extent, or under what conditions, should medical-related and other commercial activities be allowed to expand into what are presently residential properties?

New Industrial and Business Park Development

1. **Guidelines for Site Planning:** Should the *Multi-Family Housing Design Manual* (1998) be strengthened and made mandatory by incorporating those guidelines as requirements in the zoning ordinance?
2. **Density of Development:** Should the City encourage higher densities in its industrial and business parks?

Factors Affecting Urban Form and Visual Character

Natural Features and Historical Development Pattern

Streams, hills, floodplains and woods often influence where a city is located and how it grows, and this certainly was the case in Eau Claire where the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers were the major influence.

The first European-built houses in the area were constructed by French-Canadians who came to trade for furs with the Sioux and Chippewa Indians. Their rough log cabins were fashioned from magnificent white pines that covered the Chippewa Valley northward for over one hundred miles.

But by 1850, settlers arrived from the East to seek their fortune from the seemingly endless forests. This river junction, with its transportation routes, natural log storage areas and water power for sawmills, provided an ideal place for these Yankee entrepreneurs to establish a new lumbering center.

Several sawmills were in operation by 1855. By 1857, one tiny village had developed on the west bank of the Chippewa River, while two others grew up on the north and south sides of the Eau Claire River. By 1860, their combined population had grown from a handful of people to over 2,000. The face of the community was changing, and so was its housing. Family homes, rooming houses, stores, hotels and bars sprang up, all built with the narrow boards produced in the local mills.

The settlements boomed in spite of setbacks caused by frequent fires and floods. The first reliable bridges were built over the Eau Claire River in 1859 and the Chippewa River in 1869, and the first locomotive arrived in 1870. In 1872, the three original villages were incorporated as the City of Eau Claire.

Early Planning and Development

Many cities in the United States experienced their first period of major growth in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, as did Eau Claire. Civic pride of place was strong, and cities were often laid out in detailed plan, with parks and parkways, civic buildings, bridges and grand boulevards lined with trees. Building materials were often drawn from what could be found in the region, and structures were designed according to a set of commonly held principles of proportion, form and ornamentation.

The result was usually varied enough to be interesting, but the underlying continuity of built form created a harmonious whole. And, as the automobile had not yet begun to dictate the form of the built environment, the pedestrian-scaled city could be experienced and appreciated by all during the course of everyday business.

Contemporary Influences

After World War II, a booming economy and new technologies contributed to both the rise of the family car as the primary mode of transportation, and the spread of new housing into the countryside. The natural controls that had kept built form within the familiar parameters disappeared, and enthusiasm for the streamlined forms and new technologies of the “Automobile Age” took off with the demand for new housing, business centers and infrastructure.

The results have been mixed, for the benefits of the freedom of the highway and the privacy and open space of the suburbs have had negative consequences that touch almost all aspects of life, many of which are a direct result of the way cities are planned and built.

Long gone are the days when Eau Claire was known only as a dairy center, and its image has changed, likewise. The physical design of the city – in both its private and public improvements – should evolve with these changes in industry and population. In an effort to understand the forces affecting contemporary built form, it is useful to study the major influences of the last 50 years.

Dominance of the Automobile: Participation in the life of most contemporary cities or suburbs demands the use of a car. There is very little choice offered, as alternative modes of travel are either dangerous, prohibitively inconvenient or both. Large amounts of land are devoted to roadways, interchanges and parking. Traffic congestion in most cities is already at unacceptable levels, and new road construction often contributes to increases in the amount of traffic. The natural environment suffers as water and air are polluted, natural resources are depleted, and wildlife habitat is destroyed in order to create new roads and parking lots. The negative consequences of sprawl are many, but perhaps none are so destructive as the distancing from nature and numbing monotony of the built environment that occurs when urban growth is overly concerned with automobile convenience.

New Technologies: New building technologies have affected the look of all types of built structures. Tilt-up panel systems have made large, inexpensive buildings easy to construct but have made featureless, uniform structures a common element in the landscape. Vinyl siding and other man-made building materials are relatively inexpensive to produce but often do not age well and have hidden environmental costs both on the production and disposal ends.

The rise of Internet business and shopping may eventually result in some reduced need for daily automobile trips. A related effect may be a resurgence of interest in the public realm, where a need for human contact and change of scene brings house-bound workers to their local coffee shop or neighborhood park. The demand for compact, aesthetically pleasing retail venues, safe public spaces, and a human-scaled environment will only increase in the coming years.

Changing Market Trends: The trends of the last twenty years have seen an increase in the amount of sprawl and automobile-associated retail business and entertainment, as well as a resurgence of interest in urban living. While large-lot development is still pushing into undeveloped areas, a more compact, less auto-dependent lifestyle is becoming more desirable for many across a broad spectrum of household types.

A long view of population trends sees the aging (but still active) Baby Boomers seeking a high-quality-of-life environment for retirement outside of the planned retirement community. The rise of single-parent households necessitates smaller, more convenient housing, close to public

transportation systems, while concern over the confining effects of contemporary suburban life on children and teenagers may cause many families to seek a more “traditional” neighborhood way of life. Rising fuel costs and the uncertainties of the economy may also contribute to a slowing of demand for the extra-large suburban housing and truck-sized automobiles. Increased public discussion and education about the issues of sustainable living may also have an effect on market trends.

Pedestrian Nodes in a Varied Urban Environment: Regardless of which forms dominate the market in coming decades, all indicators suggest that a healthy, successful community will offer a range of housing choices and transportation alternatives within a varied, human-scaled public realm.

This suggests a need to build Eau Claire differently than the conventional approach to restore balance by countering the strong influence of the automobile.

Community Image

Defining the intrinsic image or identity of a city is a step toward drafting meaningful design ideas. Local identity may be composed of (a) geography and natural features, (b) urban form and (c) non-visual aspects of civic identity.

Geography and Natural features

Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers

Eau Claire's location at the confluence of the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers is its most dominant feature. As the two rivers wind through the city, they are visible from many neighborhoods and locations. Several bridges pass over them, and other roads and bicycle paths run along side them. North and south of the downtown, tall, wooded bluffs rise from the banks of the Chippewa River, providing magnificent views and framing vistas up and down the river. Half Moon lake is an oxbow of the Chippewa River and also an integral part of Eau Claire.

Hills

Several lines of hills surround the city and define the stream valleys. They provide views, separate neighborhoods and districts, and provide visual interest. Roads wind around them or slice down their slopes. Cretan prominent points, such as Mts. Simon, Tom and Washington, are landmarks and visual references.

Wooded Slopes

Related to the hills are the wooded slopes and the bluffs, especially along the Chippewa River. The dense woods give the city a sense of place among the rolling farmlands. Approaching Eau Claire from the west along I-94, a driver descends into the Chippewa River valley through scattered groves then passes through dense forests on both sides of the highway. At that point, the city is hardly noticeable, and a very green image of the community is presented. In the northeastern quadrant, near the Town of Seymour and around Altoona Lake, the pines and oaks are thick on the steep hillsides, providing attractive housing sites. Trees also fill the several creek valleys.

Farmlands

Finally, emerging from the river valleys, there are high, rolling farmlands all around Eau Claire with dairy farms, cultivated fields and numerous semi-rural houses.

Urban Form

Street Grid

In addition to its major natural features, the image of Eau Claire is defined by its street grid. The original town layout had street running parallel to the Chippewa River, such as in the downtown and the Owen Park neighborhood. Later, a north-south pattern was begun, and the points where the two grids meet create interesting viewpoints.

Outside the central core (bounded roughly by Carson Park, Dells Pond and Putnam Park) the street pattern is mostly an interconnected and modified grid with very few cul-de-sac streets. Some people very much like cul-de-sacs for their low traffic volumes and the sense of privacy they provide. However, they break up the community, force more traffic onto major streets, make walking and bicycling very difficult and cause problems for buses, emergency vehicles and snow plows.

Land Use Patterns

Housing density decreases from the central neighborhoods outward. Likewise, there is greater separation between housing and businesses in the perimeter locations. Both of these features are a direct result of the introduction of the automobile. Many people enjoy the greater diversity and tighter urban fabric of the older neighborhoods, and these are what many people point to as symbolic of Eau Claire, but others prefer the more bucolic and private patterns of the newer areas.

Businesses line the major roadways such as Clairemont Street or Hastings Way. For the most part, these businesses use a suburban strip-mall or medium-to-big box form with large, brightly lit open parking lots and pylon signs facing the roadways. These forms give way to older, smaller, single-story commercial, institutional and multi-family residential land uses as one proceeds toward the city center.

Downtown

The downtown clings to its historic role as the psychological and visual center of the community even if its economic role has greatly diminished. It still has a large stock of attractive multi-story brick buildings although it is pock-marked with open parking lots and architectural alterations. Unfortunately, the downtown mostly turns its back on both rivers and fails to take advantage of them as amenities and economic advantages. Only recently, with a couple office and residential buildings, the North Barstow District redevelopment and the creation of Phoenix Park, has the community made major efforts to use these assets as they should. As stated previously, the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers are the city's major visual assets and worth greater attention as the community evolves.

Oakwood Mall and Vicinity

The largest collection of retail and service businesses in the city is what many people from the hinterland imagine about Eau Claire. It is also a frequent destination for many local residents because of its size, diversity and quality.

It is not inconceivable that the Golf Road area will continue to grow in density, intensity and variety, with mixed-use development, multiple-family housing, a more urban feel and structured parking.

Civic Identity

Riverfronts

Eau Claire is fortunate in that the features that have contributed to its success as an industrial and commercial center – the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers – are also impressive physical and recreational assets. Although their beauty has long been recognized, its only in the last twenty years or so that their full value has been reflected in public policy and public interest.

In Eau Claire as in some many other American cities, the demands of industry have historically taken precedence over scenic beauty, but residents today have a greater appreciation for the recreational benefits of their environment. High on the list of livability factors are clean air, clean water, a visually pleasing public realm, and easy access to recreation and parks. Eau Claire, as a vital regional center, can afford to make the most of its natural features, not only as an enriching amenity for its residents, but also as the base for a strong recreation and hospitality-based industry. *Indeed, the community cannot afford to ignore its natural features as a means of enriching quality of life.*

Computing Center

Another major feature of the Eau Claire identity is its intellectual and applied science base. Eau Claire is home to a campus of the Univeristy of Wisconsin, which has a campus overlooking the Chippewa River. Eau Claire and its neighbor, Chippewa Falls, have several computer-related firms such as Cray Research and Hutchinson Technology, perhaps making it the “Silicon Valley of Wisconsin.”

Medical Center

Even more important than the computing industry is the large and growing medical establishment. People now travel long distances for treatment in Eau Claire, particularly since Luther-Middlefort Hospital joined forces with the Mayo medical system.

Retail Center

Oakwood Mall is a major retail force and one of the few enclosed malls in the state. The city has more grocery stores than normally found in a community of this size. As with the medical industry, the Eau Claire retail market area extends far from the city. Moreover, the Oakwood Mall location has attracted many national retail stores and restaurants that are not found in smaller towns. These and other businesses cater to a population with disposal income and demanding tastes.

Urban Design Themes

The preceding and subsequent material in this chapter could be synthesized into these dominant visual or design themes. These thematic ideas could be the basis for public and private design and public art in Eau Claire.

Confluence of the Rivers: The confluence of the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers gave rise to this community and remains its visual and psychological center.

Traditional Neighborhoods: The older neighborhoods, with their front porches, tree-lined streets, and nearby commercial nodes, are the most beloved images of life in Eau Claire even if they are not longer the most typical neighborhood style.

Wooded Hillsides: Eau Claire is an island of shaded relief in the midst of the larger rolling prairie. The community is embraced by the hills, and they form a green backdrop for some of the neighborhoods.

Analysis of Visual Character Elements

New Residential Areas

The visual appearance of newer residential neighborhoods (built since 1945) tended to be dominated by one type of housing versus another. That is, a district is usually composed entirely of detached housing or entirely of attached housing, and usually the same type of attached housing. While this provides a comforting degree of consistency, it is also monotonous. In the case of attached housing, it often means an excess of one type of housing or even a concentration of attached housing in one location.

The neighborhoods of single-family detached housing are dominated by the garage doors. Some of the newer neighborhoods have trees in the street right-of-way while other only have private landscaping. Likewise, the presence of public sidewalks along these streets is infrequent.

Multiple-family housing in the newer neighborhoods, is often not stylistically compatible with detached housing. This is, it often lacks the roof pitch, front door, window pattern and enclosed parking usually found in single-family housing. Consequently, it does not reinforce the street edge adequately.

Finally, parks in these neighborhoods could be used more effectively as neighborhood focal points. Too often, they are lined with private lots, lack a strong design element (such as a gazebo or landscaping pattern), are overly utilitarian in design, or are not centered in the neighborhood.

New Residential Neighborhoods



Farm fields on the urban fringe unobstructed by very-large-lot subdivisions could evolve into new, compact neighborhoods.



Houses on oversized semi-rural, semi-urban lots such as this one use land very inefficiently and interfere with proper city growth.



Some multiple-family housing in Eau Claire lacks sensitivity to the public street and is not visually compatible with single-family housing.



Some contemporary neighborhoods provide very fine houses but sometimes lack sidewalks.



Streetscape such as this provide convenience, safety, beauty and a sense of community in new neighborhoods.



Most minor residential streets in new Eau Claire neighborhoods are much wider than necessary or desirable.

Established Neighborhoods

Oldest Neighborhoods

The oldest neighborhoods of Eau Claire, especially those on the near-west and near-south sides of the downtown, have an attractive pattern of narrow streets, sidewalks, street trees and porches. There are beautiful historic houses and districts, traditional park features and nearby, small commercial nodes. These districts were designed for walking, and they glorify the sidewalk, porch and front yard. They serve as a reminder of the way the city once was, and also provides inspiration for the way it can be.

Other Neighborhoods

Other neighborhoods of Eau Claire are attractive in their own ways, but the emphasis moved from walkability to automobile access. This led to greater dominance of the garage door, a gradual shifting of the private outdoor space to the back of the house, wider streets and bigger lots. Apartment buildings and townhouses came to be designed with less sensitivity to the public space of the street, and had less resemblance to single-family houses. Consequently, these housing forms as not as compatible in the newer neighborhoods as they were in the old. Sidewalks were often built on only one side of the street if at all.

Established Residential Neighborhoods



Eau Claire has an abundance of modest-cost housing with three or more bedrooms, such as this example.



Classic Eau Claire houses like this one, set behind street trees and a sidewalk, have enduring charm.



Mature tree canopy in established neighborhoods provide lasting value.



Luxury apartments, sometimes above offices, restaurants or shops, are an attractive alternative for part of the population and important to the vitality of downtown.

Major Road Corridors

Major roads have a dramatic effect on the image of a city because a person may view many miles of them daily and because they are composed of both public space and private space. The major road corridors in Eau Claire include:

- Hastings Way
- Clairemont Avenue
- Hendrickson Drive
- US 124 (The North Crossing)
- Old Wells Road
- Cameron Street
- Birch Street
- TH 124 – The North Crossing:
- State Street
- Golf Road

In general, these and other major road corridors in Eau Claire could use improvements such as:

- Land use: Less reliance on a strip of commercial development one lot deep in favor of introducing some housing sites and creating commercial or industrial areas that orient toward a secondary street rather than the major road.
- Site improvements: The location of the building, its entrance and windows, parking lots, loading areas and trash handling could be arranged on the site to create a more view from the major road.
- Landscaping: In conjunction with site planning, trees, shrubs and berms could be used to soften the appearance of the parking lot and generally improve the image of the property, especially for businesses or industry.
- Signs: As with most cities, signs tend to be too numerous, large and complicated.
- Access management: The number and location of street intersections and private driveways often needs greater control and coordination to protect the traffic capacity of the road.

Hastings Way

Hastings Way, Clairemont Avenue and Hendrickson Drive are primarily commercial in nature. Because of the zoning regulations in place during their time of development, they lack private landscaping, have excessive amounts of business signage and are overlit. Parking is almost always in front of the building and has insufficient berming or plantings to soften the view. The positive effect of the zoning amendments adopted since the 1993 comprehensive plan can be seen in the newer business sites.

US 53 is a classic example of a state highway gone bad. Originally intended as a fringe by pass of Eau Claire and part of a much longer state artery, lack of access control led to its function being greatly diminished. With numerous driveways, left-turns lanes and street intersections, US 53 could no longer accommodate the demand to carry traffic across or past Eau Claire while serving as a local access street for businesses. A new alignment was needed, at great cost, to assume the traffic function.

Now, the Hastings Way corridor is a varied mixture of auto-oriented businesses, parking lots, billboards and business signs. It has little sense of place, entry or arrival. There is no accommodation for any pedestrian, even once they're out of the car in the parking lot, and there is a poor relationship to the residential areas to the rear of the commercial strip.

The challenge for property owners, Eau Claire and Lake Hallie will be to improve the appearance of the commercial sites with better architecture, site planning, landscaping and signage while consolidating highway access points.

Major Road Corridors



Most major road corridors in Eau Claire would benefit from public and private landscaping, smaller business signs and decorative lighting.



Frontage road help separate the functions of movement and access, but trees should be used to reduce the visual width of the corridor.



The recently-rebuilt Birch Street moves traffic to and from the Downtown well but lacks charm.



Some local residential streets are much wider than necessary



Hastings Way carries large volumes of traffic and has numerous turn lanes and intersections.



Hastings Way south of Brackett Avenue.

Clairemont Avenue

Although the access control along Clairemont Avenue on the western side of Eau Claire is very good, thanks to the use of frontage roads, the paved area is consequently enormous. As a highway it functions well, but it divides the community and lacks visual appeal.

In its east-west alignment, the Clairemont Avenue design changes to a more urban cross-section with curbing and no frontage roads. Access is limited to major intersections. Its intersection with Hendrickson Drive should be improved as a major arrival point and entrance to two of the community's greatest institutions – Sacred Heart Hospital and the University of Wisconsin. The passage near the university lacks the beauty and importance that it deserves and is marred by the back side of a power plant. The pedestrian overpass adds a sense of gateway, and the section past Putnam Park and the neighborhoods is attractive. Once again, the commercial node at Hastings Way cries for visual improvement.

Hendrickson Drive

Hendrickson Drive is another important perimeter access corridor. On the south are the magnificent river valleys, wooded hills and one of the city's better business parks; on the north is the University of Wisconsin campus. However, in between are treeless parking lots, numerous billboards and franchise architecture. As an introduction to the community, it is sorely lacking.

US 124

The North Crossing is a major entrance into the Eau Claire and Chippewa Falls community from the direction of the Twin Cities. It runs most of the way east-west across the urban area and offers views up and down the Chippewa River. But because it is designed to carry large numbers of cars and trucks at high speeds, it forms a barrier rather than a seam. Additionally, the road edges have little or no landscaping, so the visual effect does not convey the beauty of the rest of the city. Auto-oriented commercial development near the interchange with I-94 (in Union Township) lacks landscaping while being over-lit and over-signed.

Old Wells Road

Old Wells is a lower functional classification of road than others such as Hastings Way or Clairemont Avenue, and has been designed with just two lanes and closely-spaced local street intersections. Traffic speeds are calmed by the road's curves and hills. Trees and a decorative iron fence soften the edges, and drivers can steal glimpses of the Chippewa River through the foliage. Altogether, Old Wells is a very attractive alternative to the many overbearing and visually chaotic arterials of Eau Claire. Its complements are the other spokes of the wheel emanating from downtown: the newly-redesigned Birch Street, Harding Avenue, State Street and Cameron Street.

Golf Road

Golf Terrace winds through hills and woods between Highway 93 and Highway 53. It links shops, small offices, the regional mall and housing. Golf Road fits into the landscape nicely and does duty as both a major commercial artery and residential approach.

Cameron and Birch Streets

Cameron and Birch Street are lined primarily with housing, so they present a generally pleasing image. Pathfinding along those routes to Downtown could be improved, however.

State Street

State Street is one of the more interesting and attractive thoroughfares in Eau Claire. It combines residential and commercial frontages, hills, views to Putnam Park, greenery and historic houses. It carries a significant traffic volume without severely harming the adjacent neighborhoods.

Commercial Districts

Eau Claire has two basic types of commercial districts: those built before the automobile became prominent and those built to serve the auto.

Urban Commercial Districts

The pre-auto districts include principally Downtown, which is described in a separate section below, West Grand Avenue and Water Street.. The buildings in these locations are oriented toward the sidewalks and the street while parking is on-street, behind the building or on a separate site. Often, offices or housing units are included on upper stories, and the district includes restaurants, bars, cultural activities and public spaces, all of which intensify land use and increase nighttime activity.

The result is a human-scaled and pleasant environment but one that is not as efficient for serving large numbers of retail customers from a broad geographic market because of the parking and access constraints. The downtown environment also provides many places for social interaction such as meetings or festivals and cultural events such as celebrations or parades. The benefits are a sense of place and importance, a feeling of urbanism, and an elevated role for public spaces.

Locations such as Downtown, West Grand Avenue and Water Street are beloved and sustained for those qualities while auto-oriented retail centers come and go with the tides of business. These older districts need improvements to streetscape, building facades, parking, tenant mix and upper-story spaces.

Suburban Commercial Districts

The suburban commercial districts built in the last 60 years usually suffer from lack of edge landscaping, oversized signage, proliferation of billboards, too much lighting glare, lack of pedestrian amenities, visual dominance of parking, poor access design, lack of public space and having but a single type of land use. Inadequate zoning regulations were often the cause of these ills. Consequently, various stages of retail abandonment and re-use can be seen in a progression outward from the center of the city as newer, bigger more accessible “centers” are built.

An important urban design challenge for Eau Claire, as for many cities, is how these utilitarian business sites are rehabilitated, repositioned or entirely redeveloped.

Commercial Districts



Classic buildings such as these along Water Street include housing over shops and relate well to the sidewalk.



Contemporary commercial buildings, even those serving the auto, can be attractive with proper site planning, signage and landscaping.



Older buildings should be restored and adaptively reused, as they add much to the city's character and charm.



Attractive materials and a secondary, subordinate position for the parking lot help make this new office building visually pleasing.



Auto-oriented contemporary buildings can display a degree of urban character even if they are not truly part of an urban setting.



Small commercial building set within a residential neighborhood, perhaps built in another era, can sometimes contribute to the charm and interest of a district.

Riverfronts

Access and Orientation

As stated several times already in this chapter, the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers are the visual and psychological center of Eau Claire. Although they are lined with several attractive linear parks, the community would do well to seek additional public open space and use it to leverage more appropriate intensive private development such as housing, offices and restaurants. Overall, the community lacks adequate public visual and functional access to the rivers, which were originally dominated by industrial and commercial activities.

Topography

The riverfronts are composed of a combination of towering bluffs, such as near the University of Wisconsin campus, that provide dramatic views, and low approaches to the river, such as near Downtown, that make the water seem accessible. The river edge itself would be more attractive if natural means were used to stabilize the banks rather than the heavy reliance on stone rip-rap.

South Bridge

Some transportation planners have long advocated a Chippewa River bridge from Fifth Avenue through the university arboretum to Hendrickson Drive. There is intense opposition to that idea because of the negative effects it might have on the West Side Neighborhood and the University campus.

Riverfronts



Banbury Place and the S-Bridge, two fine examples of adaptive re-use, add to the scenic beauty of the Eau Claire River corridor.



The upper reach of the Chippewa River is lined with wooded hillsides and parks



Half Moon Lake in Carson Park shows traces of Wisconsin's original forests



The Chippewa River State Trail links the trailhead at Phoenix Park to a linear park on the west bank of the river.



The lower reach of the Chippewa River passes under wooded bluffs and the University of Wisconsin campus.

Downtown

Downtown Eau Claire has many wonderful qualities, a few visual problems and many fine, untapped opportunities. Downtown has many attractive traditional commercial and mixed-use buildings but is punctuated by a number of undistinguished or badly modernized structures and open parking lots. As the visual and psychological center of the city, it deserves a high degree of attention in terms of design treatment.

Riverfront Orientation

Downtown is defined as four districts that surround the confluence of the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers (central business, North Barstow, medical center and courthouse) . Despite this abundance of waterfront views, most Downtown buildings turn their backs on the river. Even worse, the riverfront is sometimes used for parking or open storage.

The Downtown Action Agenda

The Downtown Action Agenda noted this situation and recommended that new or remodeled structures have windows, balconies and plazas toward the water. In addition, there should be much more and better quality public open space along the river, including promenades and seating. The redevelopment occurring in the North Barstow District is a magnificent opportunity to begin a positive pattern of change.

Streetscape and the Public Realm

Design in the central business district is not always mindful of the importance of creating attractive public space along the street for pedestrians. Essential features that are sometimes overlooked include windows and window displays, frequent doors, attractive façade materials, canopies, lighting, and well-maintained sidewalks. Surface parking should be screened with fences, walls and plantings along the sidewalk. Structured parking sometimes intrudes on the pedestrian environment instead of being lined with shops or offices at street level.

Urbanism

The Downtown lacks nighttime activity and a sense of after-hours security. There is insufficient downtown housing to give the area of feel of an urban neighborhood. In particular, there is a shortage of attractive housing that has an urban look and feel, in which the street is celebrated. Buildings with housing or offices above shops would be an ideal addition; row houses with steps and patios along the street would be another product that would enliven downtown. Some downtowns have a public green or town square around which offices, shops and/or housing clusters and people congregate.

Downtown



Several Downtown buildings have significant architectural merit.



Barstow Street has a large stock of attractive older buildings



Careful renovation can breathe new life into old commercial buildings.



7 South Dewey Street is an attractive new structure along the riverfront trail.

Edge District Relationships

The commercial and residential districts that compose or abut Downtown would benefit from public and private improvements that improve appearances, link and define them better. There is insufficient sense that Downtown is a unified whole, that it has edges and a center, and that there it is composed of distinct and coherent districts. Features such as street trees, decorative lighting, public art, private landscaping, building orientation and land use intensity all could be used more effectively to accomplish those aims. The medical center medical center district, for example, would benefit from those treatments. Owen Park, a very attractive traditional park, forms the western edge of the Downtown but does link well to the neighborhoods, the nearby medical district, the river or the central business district.

Access and Wayfinding

Access to Downtown from the perimeter highways is unclear. Downtown would benefit from more-attractive wayfinding signs and stronger street trees and lighting along its major access routes: Cameron Street, Birch Street, State Street, Harding Avenue and Old Wells Road.

Public and Institutional Buildings

Public and semi-public buildings are an opportunity to express community pride, local cultural and social heritage or a sense of collective mission. Whether it is the City Hall or a water pumping station, public buildings should be designed with the knowledge that they will convey an important message to residents and visitors. Therefore, the design should express pride in civic life and accomplishment through architecture forms, materials, and siting. Public agencies should resist the temptation to cur corners on these features for the sake of current budgets as they leave a long-lasting impression.

The most important public building in Eau Claire is the City Hall, but it has lost its original grandeur (inside and out) through inappropriate renovation and expansion. The federal court house, on the other hand, retains its beauty.

Park structures are another way to express civic themes. Eau Claire has recently installed several recreation buildings and picnic shelters that share a design theme, which is a beneficial approach. Parks can also be designed as a center point for a neighborhood, such as University Park was, as well as having less-ornamental functions. The Carson Park Baseball Stadium is a splendid marriage of symbolic design, function and social significance.

Schools, like parks, have symbolic power. Their design can express the importance that the community places on education and the welfare of its children.

Public and Institutional Buildings



The University of Wisconsin is a major educational, cultural, entertainment and economic asset to Eau Claire. It is also a visually attractive campus set on the river bluff.



Luther Hospital and Middlefort Clinic are undeniably essential to Eau Claire and have created a medical district in the downtown. Some urban design solutions relative to the adjacent neighborhood are still evolving.



Landmarks such as this church are important to one's sense of place, home, family and community.



The Minor League ballpark in Carson Park is a jewel and a treasure.



Elementary schools can be designed to complement their neighborhoods.



Outstanding architecture should be protected at all cost.

Zoning and Subdivision Ordinances and Design Guidelines

The city exercises major control over the appearance of private development through its zoning and subdivision ordinances.

- **Zoning Ordinance:** The Zoning Ordinance, Chapter 18 of the City Code, regulates features such as : the allowable use of each parcel of land, the minimum size of lots, minimum building and parking setbacks from property lines, the minimum lot size (in effect, the maximum density), the maximum building height, the minimum number of parking spaces, and the landscaping of new commercial properties, among other things.
- **Subdivision Ordinance:** The Subdivision Ordinance, Chapter 17 of the City Code, regulates the process of dividing land and prescribes the standards for the design of public improvements, such as street widths, in new multi-lot subdivisions.

Zoning Ordinance

Overall, the zoning ordinance is a very standard set of regulations , in that it emphasizes the separation of different types of land use, especially housing from all other types of development. Close relationships of different land uses may be accomplished through the Planned Development District.

The zoning ordinance probably goes too far in its separation of land uses. For instance, allowing duplexes in single-family housing districts under certain conditions would reduce the concentrations of duplexes and make neighborhoods more interesting. Or, limited retail or office uses along major streets in what otherwise would be a single-family district would also help. Many Midwestern cities have good examples of successfully mixing land use through zoning.

Many residential or commercial developments are processed under the Planned Development feature of the ordinance, which allows some negotiation on the density and dimensions but also gives the City more control. The Planned Development feature includes many standards and requirements that would improve the appearance and function of the city if made part of the standard residential or commercial districts.

Section 18.45 presents requirements for the site design of all new development except single-family housing. These include site coverage, building placement, access, interior circulation, lighting, landscaping and trash handling. The interpretation and application of these requirements has significant effect on the city's appearance. Although this section has been amended since the 1993 comprehensive plan, there is still much room for improvement.

In 1998, the City prepared the Multi-Family Housing Design Manual, which is mostly advisory, not mandatory. However, the Planning Commission has been compelling developers to follow those guidelines when they apply for site plan approval. This has resulted in many design improvements compared to previous years. However, the City should strongly consider the content of the Design Manual and then incorporating those ideas into the zoning ordinance as requirements.

A Traditional Neighborhood Development District was added in 2002 to fulfill a state requirement. That district allows features such as alleys, shorter front setbacks, close proximity

of residential and commercial land uses, secondary housing units on a parcel, narrower streets, and architectural guidelines.

The ordinance is unnecessarily difficult to read and understand because of its page formatting.

Subdivision Ordinance

The most apparent urban design result of the Subdivision Ordinance is the requirement for the width of local residential streets. Section 17.12 requires that such public streets be 30 feet wide (measured to the back of the curbing), and that the public land (or right-of-way) be 60 feet wide. The 30-foot street width dimension is somewhat greater than necessary, especially given the fact that most new houses have at least two garage stalls, resulting in very little on-street parking. The right-of-way width allows sufficient space for a row of trees and a sidewalk.

A public sidewalk abutting the street side of each lot is required to be installed by the developer.

Alleys are specifically not allowed in residential areas.